

# Think Positively! And Make a Difference Through Evaluation

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**Abstract:** *This article introduces a special theme segment of CJPE that identifies and discusses various approaches to evaluation that support positivity. It also discusses why an approach to evaluation that supports positivity is basic to the objectives and raison d'être of evaluation—to contribute, generally in an indirect manner, to social betterment. This article identifies several lessons from psychology for approaches to evaluation: that positive reinforcement generally is more effective in achieving learning and behaviour change than negative reinforcement or punishment, and that intrinsic motivation, involving internalization of values, is necessary for commitment and the desire to make changes. The article indicates how a positivity focus to evaluation is consistent with the demands of accountability and the obligation of evaluators to tell the truth.*

**Keywords:** *accountability, defensiveness, evaluation use, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, positivity, reinforcement*

**Résumé :** *Cet article présente un segment thématique de la RCÉP consacrée à identifier et discuter les approches de l'évaluation positiviste. Cet article explique également pourquoi une approche d'évaluation positiviste rejoint les objectifs fondamentaux et la raison d'être de l'évaluation, qui est de contribuer, en général indirectement, à l'amélioration du mieux-être social. L'article identifie les leçons apprises de la psychologie applicables aux approches d'évaluation, dont notamment que le renforcement positif est généralement plus efficace pour générer l'apprentissage et le changement de comportement que le renforcement négatif ou les sanctions et que la motivation intrinsèque impliquant l'internalisation de valeurs est nécessaire pour l'engagement et le désir de faire du changement. Cet article indique comment une approche positiviste à l'évaluation est cohérente avec les exigences de reddition de comptes et l'obligation pour les évaluateurs de dire la vérité.*

**Mots clés :** *reddition de comptes, défensive, utilisation de l'évaluation, motivation intrinsèque et extrinsèque, positivisme, renforcement*

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## INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE OF THIS SPECIAL THEME SEGMENT

This special theme segment of *CJPE* identifies and discusses approaches to evaluation that support positive thinking and action. In the following article, Nicoletta Stame provides an overview of a range of approaches that can be used, relating these approaches to alternative program perspectives. In subsequent articles, two approaches are then discussed in more detail: Appreciative Inquiry by David MacCoy, and Realist Evaluation by Sanjeev Sridharan and Tim Warren, along with examples of how these approaches have been applied in practice.

In this article, I consider why an approach to evaluation that supports positive thinking is basic to the objectives and *raison d'être* of evaluation.

## THE RATIONALE FOR UNDERTAKING EVALUATION

Why is this special theme section advocating a positive approach to evaluation? Is this really an appropriate role for evaluators? Is this consistent with the role and obligation of evaluators to carry out objective, impartial assessments and then to “tell it like it is,” letting the chips fall where they may? A recent special issue of this journal (*CJPE*, 2010) focused on learning from less-than-successful evaluations. Is a positive approach to evaluation consistent with all this?

The answer to this question is basic to the *raison d'être*, or rationale, of evaluation. Why do evaluation? Mark, Henry, and Julnes (2000; see also Henry & Mark, 2003 and Mark & Henry, 2004) describe the rationale for evaluation as social betterment or, in other words, aiding in improving the world, or at least some small part of it. Typically this benefit of evaluation happens indirectly, through influencing others and aiding in improved and more appropriate and effective policies, strategies, program approaches, or even improved thinking and organizational culture.

It is important to acknowledge that evaluation per se has no intrinsic value. It is only of value if it is used in some way that can contribute to some form of improvement. This implies that evaluators need to have a future orientation, looking not just backwards on what did or did not take place, but also looking ahead in such a way that evaluation findings and implications will be taken into consideration in planning and implementing future directions.

Such an approach to evaluation as we advocate is fully consistent with the tenets of utilization-focused and developmental evaluation, championed in particular by Michael Patton (e.g., Patton, 2008, 2011). Evaluation reports rarely speak for themselves. A utilization-focused approach to evaluation requires thinking about use right from the planning stages. A corollary of this is that evaluators need to have some understanding of how the process of undertaking an evaluation can contribute in a meaningful way to evaluation use. All of the articles in this section emphasize the importance of process, of engaging stakeholders throughout the evaluation.

A positive, or constructive, approach to evaluation is also consistent with the perspective and evidence of positive organizational psychology and scholarship

that centres on “positive dynamics that bring positive effects” (Donaldson & Ko, 2010, p. 179). As Donaldson and Ko add, the basic idea of this focus is “that understanding the drivers of positive behavior in the workplace would enable organizations to rise to new levels of achievement.” They point out that positive organizational psychology is in turn part of the positive psychology movement, which focuses “on strengths, solutions, and what makes life worth living” (p. 177). As Preskill and Donaldson (2008) have indicated, research approaches stimulated by the positive psychology movement, including approaches identified in this special section of the journal, “represent examples of conceptual shifts away from traditional problem or deficient-based frameworks to strength-based or optimal functioning conceptual orientations” (p. 112).

Ianni and Orr (1979) indicated some time ago that “[i]t is no longer enough to say that Johnny can’t read. What is now being asked is why he can’t and what will make him learn.” Mohr (1988) has observed that program staff

deplore being told that their efforts are or are not having much effect, especially the last. What they want to know is *why*—how to make a weak program stronger or an effective program even more effective, or perhaps more efficient. (p. 26)

Program managers would rather obtain constructive guidance from evaluation about what they can do than be criticized for what was done in the past.

As Henry and Mark (2003) and Mark and Henry (2004) have noted, the evaluation field increasingly has recognized the importance of evaluation use and the responsibility of evaluators in this regard. Nevertheless, use is still frequently seen, or at least treated, as something that happens in response to submission of a final evaluation report (e.g., Skolits, Morrow, & Burr, 2009), often with insufficient attention to how the process of evaluation can facilitate, or inhibit, use. Although many evaluators have taken the tenets of utilization-focused evaluation to heart, there is not always a full appreciation of what this means, with some evaluators still seeing it as their mission to sniff out and highlight problems.

The approach to evaluation that the authors in this special theme section advocate contrasts with how the subjects of evaluation often view it, rightly or wrongly: as overly focused on fault finding and on identifying the inevitable problems, glossing over what is working well and what has been achieved. As a result, many managers often feel that the best they can get from an evaluation is not to be hurt. Approaches to evaluation that are—or are seen as—overly focused on the negative invariably result in a mentality of defensiveness and justification. This is inconsistent with a learning-oriented culture or mentality where managers recognize there is always room for change or improvement and seek out assistance, including from evaluation in this regard. This also contrasts with an approach to evaluation that can identify and substantiate good practices (see Perrin, 2006a, with respect to how to undertake a “good practices” approach, and how this differs from “best” practices).

The evaluation function in some large governmental and international organizations is combined organizationally with (or even under) auditing, which

can give the message, intended or otherwise, that evaluation is a control mechanism rather than a tool that can help to achieve improved policies and programs. A similar message is often given when too much emphasis is placed on the “independence” of the evaluation function, or when evaluators seek to maintain their distance from those involved in a program for fear of compromising their “objectivity.” At a result, program managers and staff do not always fully appreciate the potential of evaluation to be a positive force that can assist in increasing effectiveness and impact and in identifying the need for new directions. I have heard managers, including senior executives of large international organizations, confuse evaluation with auditing, or, at least in private, question how evaluation can produce anything (positive) for them.

Evaluators clearly have an obligation to tell the truth, as they see it. But there are many ways in which this can be done, including in a constructive manner. It is inconsistent with the objectives of evaluation, and ultimately self-defeating, if this is done in such a way as to discourage, or indeed even inhibit, needed changes or improvements. In this respect, there is an important role for evaluation approaches that can support positive thinking and action.

## LESSONS FROM PSYCHOLOGY AND FROM RELATED FIELDS

### *Positive (and Negative) Reinforcement and Punishment*

There is much that evaluation can learn and apply from psychology and related disciplines. For example, a key principle from the psychology of learning (e.g., Skinner, 1970) is that reinforcement of desired behaviour is more effective in achieving learning—and changes in behaviour—than punishment.<sup>1</sup>

Reinforcement can be either positive (something positive added) or negative (something negative taken away in order to increase a response) in response to the desired behaviour. While the literature is divided about the relative merits of positive and negative reinforcement, or even whether or not this distinction makes sense (e.g., see Baron and Galizio, 2005; Sidman, 2006), Skinner held that positive reinforcement of a desired behaviour is generally superior. And, as I discuss below, a key theme in the positive psychology literature is the value of highlighting what *has* been done well rather than focusing primarily on what has not; this is a major theme in appreciative inquiry, as MacCoy discusses in his article in this issue.

Punishment may temporarily suppress undesired behaviour. This may be needed in some circumstances, such as to stop a child from running into the street or to stop a program from abusing its intended beneficiaries or misusing its resources. But, by itself, punishment does not lead to more appropriate or desired behaviour (e.g., Skinner, 1970).

Our experience in house training a puppy we had some time ago may help illustrate this point. When the puppy made a mess in the house, my wife and I initially bawled her out. However, the message that the dog received was that it should not make a mess when we could see it happening. This overly negative approach on our part took quite a bit of time to overcome in order for the dog to

get the right message. We did learn from this experience that it is instead much more effective to praise desired behaviour when it does occur.

To identify the correct pathway, it may sometimes first be necessary for someone to realize that they are on the wrong route. When I was a psychology student, one of my part-time jobs was running rats through a T-maze. One particular rat went the wrong way 38 out of 40 times, and then bit me. There was not a lot of positive behaviour in this case that could be reinforced. Perhaps a bit of punishment for going the wrong way (preferably accompanied by some sort of sign in rat language saying “try the other way” given by a fellow rat rather than by the experimenter whose motivations could well be questioned) might have encouraged this rat to try an alternative path and then be compensated for this.

This may also illustrate what can happen when managers and staff receive the message (whether intended or not, such as through a negative evaluation report) that they are a failure or they feel that they or their program are under attack: they lash out. And, all too often when they feel that they have been placed in a corner, they are forced into a defensive mindset that makes it difficult to acknowledge that there may be room for improvement and to be open to other possible approaches or pathways (e.g., [Perrin, 2006b](#)).

For example, I had undertaken an evaluation of a program charged with developing environmentally friendly ways of forestry management. Despite this mandate, it was clear from the evaluation that the public did not trust either the motives or the goals of the program. My colleagues and I had kept our client, the director of the program, informed about these emerging findings and some possible ways of addressing these. We suggested meeting with the program staff, who would have to respond to the findings of this study. However, to our surprise, we discovered, too late, that our client (a research scientist with little experience of or appreciation for organizational dynamics) had kept this study close to his chest, and many of his staff not only had no idea about the findings that were emerging, but did not even know until just before our meeting that the evaluation was taking place.

As a result, while we came to the meeting prepared to engage the group in discussion about ways they could establish their credibility with the public in line with their mandate of developing alternative approaches, they were in no mood for this. They questioned the findings, the fairness of the conclusions, our own motives and competence, the methodology, terminology, spelling, the “hothead” public, whether it really mattered anyway, even the widths of different columns in a table summarizing the views of different groups of stakeholders, and just about everything else. They acted defensively—in spite of the occasional acknowledgement that the findings really were not a surprise to them. After all, the program had been specifically created to deal with the views documented in the evaluation. They felt that they were under attack and acted the way most people would in such circumstances: they fought back.

The rationale for focusing on strengths rather than on deficits is a key theme in the literature on positive psychology (e.g., [Fredrickson, 2009](#); [Seligman &](#)

Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002; Vázquez & Chaves, *in press*) and also, as suggested earlier, in the related field of positive organizational psychology (e.g., Cameron & Spreitzer, 2013; Donaldson & Dollwet, 2013; Donaldson & Ko, 2010; Spreitzer, 2013; Spreitzer & Grant, 2004) that looks at ways in which optimal organizational functioning can be achieved through focusing more on the positives rather than on deficits.<sup>2</sup>

As this literature suggests (e.g., Preskill & Donaldson, 2008), kicking someone when they are down is rarely an effective means of getting them to do better. Programs aimed at aiding long-term unemployed people know that one of the main barriers is poor self-confidence. Enumerating their faults and deficits, their inadequate education and work skills, poor employment record, and so on is rarely an effective strategy that will result in immediate change. It invariably is more effective to aid individuals in such situations by appreciating whatever attributes they may have (almost everyone has some good points, even if it may require a bit of digging to uncover these), and then jointly identifying some practical and constructive ideas about how these can be improved or expanded upon, providing advice and support about how one can put one's best foot forward, and addressing sometimes very real barriers (such as childcare for women, transport, aids for people with disabilities). Perhaps most important of all, aiding people in improving their self-confidence and belief in themselves can allow them to not think or act like losers and allow them to internalize values needed for meaningful employment, including developing an appreciation of what they are capable of and recognizing where they need to improve and how they can go about doing this.

Findings from studies of leadership and human resources indicate that the same basic principles that apply to motivating welfare recipients also applies even to very senior executives (e.g., Donaldson, 2011; Fredrickson, 1998; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; Spreitzer & Grant, 2004). One invariably brings out the best of people, at any level, not by pointedly highlighting all their failings but by recognizing them for what they have been doing well and helping them see how they can build upon this to be even more effective. And, just as external barriers sometimes can prevent individuals from performing at their best, program impact is often inhibited, or even sabotaged, by organizational barriers or insufficient support.

The story of Joan of Arc, who perhaps can be described as the original Appreciative Inquiry leader, can help to illustrate this dynamic. When she assumed command (to be sure, with the aid of what she took as divine guidance) of a dilapidated French army some 600 years ago, most of France had been occupied for decades and was in a state of almost continuous war. The French army was completely ineffectual and demoralized, and generals and common soldiers alike had no confidence in their ability to win any battles, led alone liberate France from the occupying English. They knew they were losers, they acted like losers, and consequently they lost battle after battle and were incapable of seizing opportunities where they could have readily succeeded. Joan of Arc brought out the best of her leaders and soldiers, not by enumerating their deficits (a.k.a. a negative

evaluation that she realized would not change anything, after decades of negative evaluations), but instead by helping them identify the strengths that they did have and what they were capable of doing, and providing inspiration and a belief in their potential to achieve results.<sup>3</sup> What followed was a transformed army and a complete change in France's fortunes.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation***

Another related principle from psychology concerns the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (e.g., see [Ryan and Deci, 2000](#), for a discussion and review of the literature, as well as of the related concept of self-determination theory). Extrinsic motivation, when people act in response to externally imposed rewards and punishments such as discussed above, generally lasts only while these external factors are in place. As [Bénabou and Tirole \(2003\)](#) observe, external incentives are only weak reinforcers in the short term, and negative reinforcers in the long term. For lasting changes, it is necessary for values to be internalized so that people (be they senior managers, staff, recipients of aid from governments or NGOs, members of the public, or others) act not because they are forced to do something, but because they want to do so—because they believe that they are following an appropriate course of action.

Extrinsic motivation may sometimes be required, in particular when it is necessary to jump-start significant change that needs to take place quickly. Or it may sometimes be needed to get people to try something other than the status quo. But without a belief in or commitment to the desired actions, without extrinsic motivation that becomes transformed into internal motivation, these actions are unlikely to be sustainable and may very well play out in a different way than intended or mandated by the organization (e.g., the difference between espoused theory and theory-in-use, such as identified by the organizational learning gurus [Argyris & Schön, 1978](#), or acted upon in name only). This hardly represents a situation in which an organization is likely to perform at its best.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that managing knowledge workers is often described as “herding cats.” Ordering knowledge workers about may very well have the opposite effect from that intended. As [Behn \(2004\)](#) indicated: “Good performance cannot be compelled, commanded, or coerced” (p. 4). He adds that performance systems created in law or by central agency mandate to compel good performance do not work—what is needed instead is leadership. This is a common theme in the management literature (e.g., [Deming, 1982](#); [Mintzberg, 1996](#)).

There is increasing recognition of the importance of the internalization of core values, which most often is expressed in terms of organizational culture, such as a results-oriented or a learning-oriented culture, where managers and staff are encouraged to internalize appropriate values so, for example, they will constantly question what can be done differently or better (other names for this approach include continuous quality improvement and, my favourite, thinking evaluatively). Nevertheless, this is sometimes undermined by inappropriate measurement systems. For example, [Mintzberg \(1996\)](#) and [Mintzberg, Ahstrand, and Lampel \(2008\)](#)

indicate how inappropriate emphasis on the attainment of targets reinforces hierarchical control. There is an extensive literature on how the assessment of performance based upon achieving preidentified objectives or targets may result in numerous perverse effects that can impair rather than improve performance.<sup>5</sup>

Commitment, ownership, and follow-through may indeed be strongest when people are acting upon ideas and plans that they have come up with themselves, or at least believe that they have. On a personal level, we often recognize this. For example, we know that one's spouse is most likely to adopt and follow through on a particular course of action if they feel that they came up with the idea on their own. We also know that telling teenagers what to do (e.g., not to associate with inappropriate friends) is often counterproductive, leading to the reverse of the behaviour one had hoped for. Rather than forbidding your child to associate with a friend who you view as undesirable, sometimes it may be more effective to do the reverse, for example: "Yes dear, I find the combination of yellow and orange on your friend's tattoos most interesting."

The same principle applies to evaluation, with implications for the process whereby evaluation conclusions and recommendations are developed and presented. Presenting a final report along with specific recommendations identified unilaterally by an evaluator is rarely the best way to lead to meaningful, long-term change. In their articles in this issue, MacCoy and Sridharan and Warren give examples of ways in which they have been able to engage stakeholders in building a commitment to appropriate future directions, and as Stame indicates in her article, engagement of stakeholders in some way is a key theme in other approaches that support positive thinking and action.

At a minimum, key stakeholders should be given an opportunity to consider emerging findings and discuss possible implications before the final report. There is considerable evidence (e.g., Cousins, Whitmore, & Shulha, 2013; Patton, 2008, 2011; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006; Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 1996) that internalization and commitment to follow through on needed actions is more likely to come, not through reading reports or being presented with formal recommendations, but through active engagement in the evaluation process. When stakeholders are engaged in the evaluation process and in particular have an opportunity to discuss implications of emerging findings and to identify by themselves what these may mean, they very often will propose ideas that they would reject out of hand if presented by an evaluator. This is also consistent with a key principle of adult education: that adults learn best through active participation.

As the report of a roundtable discussion organized by the World Bank involving high-level officials from governments around the world indicated:

The evidence is overwhelming, from the experiences of the countries represented at the Roundtable as well as from many other sources: Buy-in and support arise ... through the active involvement of all staff. People are inclined to reject an approach imposed upon them. But if they are actively involved in its development, then it becomes their own. (Perrin, 2006b, p. 26)

When there is engagement, or at least the opportunity to discuss emerging findings, I have found that the program manager will often recognize the need for new directions or changes in approach, and put these into motion before the evaluation is finalized. By the time the final evaluation report and formal recommendations are produced, the manager may dismiss these, saying that “we’ve already been doing these things,” often forgetting that the idea came from the evaluation in the first place. But if the objective of evaluation is to facilitate appropriate action (rather than to make the evaluator look good), then this may be the preferred situation.

Evaluators most often assume (or are perceived as taking on) the role of a judge when undertaking evaluations, such as when they view the purpose of evaluation as determining the merit or value of something (e.g., [Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2001](#); [Scriven, 1991](#)). An alternative role for an evaluator is that of a critical friend (e.g., [Cousins, 2004](#)) or coach (e.g., [Hendricks, 1993](#)). This complements the facilitative role of evaluation in utilization-focused evaluation (e.g., [Patton, 2008](#)) and the relational and interactive role identified by [Benjamin and Greene \(2009\)](#).<sup>6</sup> In our personal lives, we generally are more open to accepting feedback from a spouse or friend who we know is on our side rather than from someone we may not fully trust or may feel, rightly or wrongly, is out to get us. Similarly, managers and program staff will be more open to feedback, even challenging feedback about what has taken place and changes that may be needed, when this comes from someone who is perceived as, at a minimum, having at least some sympathy with the overall values of the organization.

Some people are more open to feedback, and indeed to criticism, than are others. Some managers surround themselves with “yes men” and view any form of questioning as a challenge to their authority. In contrast, others (invariably the more successful ones) seek out advisors, colleagues, and staff members with differing perspectives whom they encourage to challenge them. Most often, there are degrees of openness. Evaluators need to be aware of these differences and dynamics, taking these into account in the manner in which evaluations are undertaken and how findings and implications are identified.

It often is easier to enumerate various shortcomings than to be positive and constructive and help others appreciate their strengths and how they can build upon them. Against our better judgement and awareness that it would not make much (positive) difference, we still often yell at our spouses and children and tell them what to do. Evaluators, by training and often by temperament, are prone to question what is being done and to criticize.

To be sure, this is part of our role as evaluators and can represent value added from an external perspective. To some extent, this may represent what may sometimes be expected of evaluation, where the objectivity of an evaluation seen as “too positive” may be suspect. There are times, just as when it is necessary to stop a child from running into the street, when it may be necessary for an evaluation to identify a situation that is in need of attention or even dangerous. But how we do this is critical. Unless evaluation can also be constructive

and help others appreciate what they can build upon as well as what needs to be changed, appropriate action is unlikely to follow. The other articles in this special theme segment of this issue identify and discuss a variety of ways in which this can be done.

Invariably, as with my rat who went the wrong way 38 of 40 times and then bit me, the initial knee-jerk reaction to being criticized and told what to do is to become defensive, to dig in one's heels, and to become overly resistant to doing things differently. This applies equally to those who view themselves as victims of evaluation (or, as evaluators often prefer to label the subjects of evaluations, the evaluands). If the objective is for evaluation to be used for improvement, such an approach may be counterproductive.

### **BUT WHAT ABOUT EVALUATION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY?**

How does an approach to evaluation that supports positive action align with evaluations carried out for the purpose of accountability? But what do we mean by “accountability”? And what is the role of “evaluation for accountability”?

As [Mayne \(2007\)](#) has pointed out, the concept of accountability is, at best, vague and elusive. He indicates that, traditionally,

Accountability is characterized as

- focusing on process, especially on the extent to which administrative rules and procedures have been followed;
- hierarchical, with a junior party being accountable to a senior party;
- assigning blame when things go wrong. (p. 65)

[Behn \(2001\)](#), in his book on democratic accountability, indicates that no one knows exactly what it means to hold someone accountable—except those who “we want to hold accountable [who] have a clear understanding of what accountability means: Accountability means punishment” (p. 3).

As [Mayne \(2007\)](#) indicates, the role of “evaluation for accountability” is even less clear. Nevertheless, this role is often viewed as determining the extent to which a policy or program has done what it was expected to do and has met its objectives (e.g., [Lehtonen, 2005](#); [Martin, 2005](#)). On the surface, it would seem difficult to quarrel with this.

However, there is ample evidence about the limitations and perverse effects of focusing overly on predetermined targets, particularly when consequences are attached to failure to meet targets used directly for accountability purposes.<sup>7</sup> As the literature documents, these include gaming and other forms of distortion of program activities that may impede, rather than contribute to, enhanced performance; lack of attention to unintended effects; possible misrepresentation of actual program results; lack of adaptability to reflect the reality that complex strategies and programs are constantly evolving in response to changing needs and circumstance; disincentive to innovation and trying out new approaches; and

increased defensiveness and justification of what was done rather than openness to acknowledging the need for changes.

Payment-by-results schemes, where service providers are held accountable and paid for achieving given results, represent a case in point where such accountability mechanisms are likely to result in program distortions. For example, an evaluation of a scheme in the United Kingdom to help long-term unemployed into work found considerable evidence of “creaming” and “parking,” with emphasis on serving people most likely to generate a fee rather than those most in need of the service (Rees, Taylor, & Damm, 2013). A review of payment-by-results schemes in international development, in particular those involving the health sector where providers were paid for health services utilization or sometimes for changes in health status, found little evidence that such schemes are effective, but found significant potential for misuse in various forms (Perrin, 2013).

As Mayne (2006) has indicated, audit (including performance audit) as a rule is better placed than evaluation in identifying compliance. Yet the boundary between evaluation and audit is not always fully clear or well understood. Although there is clearly a need to “hold to account” those entrusted with public funds and responsibilities, this function generally can be better fulfilled by audit rather than by evaluation. Auditing is often viewed as primarily focused on identifying transgressions, but many auditors view their role as providing guidelines for taking corrective action, serving as a positive mechanism to help organizations stay on the right track. The audit field is increasingly recognizing the importance of taking a broader view of accountability that reflects the realities of a more complex public service, including a better balance between negative accountability, focused on fault finding, and more positive and constructive approaches, which can also identify good practice and contribute to good management and program improvements (e.g., Wilkins & Lonsdale, 2007). There are some recent examples of application of an appreciative approach to audit (van der Wetering, 2010).

It is important to bear in mind that accountability, like evaluation, has no intrinsic value in itself. It only has value if it results in improved effectiveness and functioning of government and public services, which can include enhanced confidence in how resources are used and how this can be improved. A recent book exploring the nature of accountability (Bemelmans-Vidéc, Lonsdale, & Perrin, 2007) has proposed a new model of accountability more in keeping with the changing realities of the public sector context, with the following characteristics:

- a primary orientation on results rather than on process;
- a focus on continuous and responsive learning; and
- a dynamic rather than a static approach that reflects the complexities and uncertainties inherent in most public policy areas.

Inherent in this new vision of accountability is holding programs to account for a results orientation rather than necessarily achieving targets. Its corollary is that responsible programs should be accountable for asking the difficult questions

(such as through evaluation) and using this information to improve. Rather than being tied to inflexible targets, responsive and accountable programs should be constantly reassessing needs and the appropriateness of their objectives, asking why given results have been achieved or not, and what they should be doing more of or differently to improve. As [van der Knaap \(2007\)](#) put it, this implies a “more dynamic approach to accountability centering on the need to constantly be willing to learn” (p. 164).

When accountability is viewed in this way, there is no inherent conflict with a positive approach to evaluation for accountability that supports programs in asking critical questions as needed and is oriented on improvement and increased effectiveness.

### **DOES TAKING A POSITIVE APPROACH MEAN IGNORING PROBLEMS AND WHAT IS NOT WORKING WELL?**

The above discussion about evaluation for accountability leads into a larger question. How can an impartial evaluation deal with the inevitable problems, and programs and strategies that are not working well, if the focus is on the positive?

Evaluators clearly do have an obligation to provide an honest picture of what a program is accomplishing and the reasons for this. Often the greatest value of evaluation is to challenge conventional wisdom. Sometimes bad or unexpected news from an evaluation is not welcomed and, at the end of the day, evaluators do have the obligation to speak truth to power. There are occasions where evaluation may be needed to document and draw attention to the need for change, to set the stage for improvements and identifying new ways of doing things. Certainly not all programs or approaches are equally effective, and some may even do more harm than good to intended beneficiaries. Indeed, there is very little that cannot be improved, at least in some way. Clearly, learning can occur from what has not worked, as well as from what has—provided that there is a learning culture that treats “failure” as a learning opportunity rather than something to be punished (e.g., [Perrin, 2006b](#)).

Putting it this way suggests a way forward. As MacCoy discusses in his article in this special section, a lot depends upon how the evaluation, and the evaluation questions, are framed. As MacCoy emphasizes from the perspective of Appreciative Inquiry, focusing on what is working well and could be expanded upon places the inevitable problems or limitations in the proper context. Problems and shortcomings do invariably arise. But they can be reframed in a way that focuses attention on future directions. As discussed above, the process of engaging stakeholders, in a way that creates positive energy and a focus on what to do rather than just on what is wrong, is critical. Stame identifies various evaluation approaches that can draw lessons from trial and error to help inform future approaches. Sridharan and Warren define a positive approach to evaluation as one that can generate learning and result in program improvement. And the focus of the [CJPE \(2010\)](#) special issue on “less-than-successful evaluation experiences” is on what one can apply from these experiences to future approaches.

Among the range of potential evaluation methodologies, Appreciative Inquiry may perhaps be viewed by those not familiar with how the approach works in practice as focusing on just “the good stuff.” But MacCoy indicates that this represents a major misconception. Inevitably “problems” do surface, but in the context of what should be done in the future, which may very well include changes large and small, including stopping certain activities or programs. Indeed, Appreciative Inquiry approaches have often been used in “problem situations” where there are major conflicts and where other approaches have been tried but have not succeeded.

The same principle also applies to other approaches, such as realist evaluation, as discussed by Sridharan and Warren in their article in this issue of the journal. The mantra of realist evaluation, as first put forth by [Pawson and Tilley \(1997\)](#); see also [Pawson, 2006](#)), is to identify “what works for whom in what circumstances.” As they indicate, most programs do “work” for some, but not other, people. A realist approach to evaluation seeks to identify the configurations of context and mechanisms where interventions will (and, by the same token, will not) be effective. This is hardly ignoring “problems.” In her article, Stame identifies a range of other evaluation approaches that work in similar ways.

## **CONCLUSION: HOW CAN EVALUATORS SUPPORT A POSITIVE FOCUS, WHILE STILL BEING TRUE TO THEIR VALUES?**

There is not just one right way to undertake evaluation that can help lead to positive thinking and action. As this article has indicated, a lot concerns mindset. A theory or approach to evaluation that is focused on use leading to social betterment, rather than just on creation of a technical report, has particular implications for how the evaluator interacts and communicates with stakeholders throughout the entire evaluation process. The importance of “soft” (or interpersonal) skills for evaluators, such as communication, listening, and facilitation skills, is highlighted in various typologies of skills required by evaluators (e.g., [King & Stevahn, 2013](#); [Perrin, 2005](#); [Stevahn, King, Ghery, & Minnema, 2005](#); [Zorzi, Perrin, McGuire, Long, & Lee, 2002](#)). This nevertheless represents a skills set in which evaluators often are weak (with an overemphasis on technical research skills). Soft skills such as the above are also increasingly being identified in various statements of evaluation standards (e.g., see [OECD Development Assistance Committee, 2010](#); [Yarborough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011](#)).

How an evaluation is received and acted upon depends to a large extent on how it is carried out and how both findings and suggestions are presented. The initial gut reaction to an evaluation carried out by an outsider to the program in question (which can apply just as much to an internal evaluator as to an external evaluation consultant) criticizing what a program is doing is very likely to be defensive. But it depends. Very often, if program managers and staff are given an opportunity to review the evidence themselves and consider what it means, they may very well be just as tough on themselves, if not more so, than an external critic whose advice and recommendations may well be rejected out of hand. Problems and challenging

findings are not neglected, but framed and approached from the perspective of what one can learn from what has taken place and what one can do about it in the future. Again, this goes back to the importance of soft skills for evaluators.

As Donaldson (2011) has indicated, and all the authors in this special theme segment endorse, it is important to develop an understanding of the dynamics (or “program perspectives,” such as Stame discusses in her article) of planned interventions intended to change human experience and behaviour. Donaldson indicates that existing research and evidence presents “a compelling case for the value of positive psychology and its potential applications for improving the human condition” (p. 216). Yet, citing Kurt Lewin, he also observes that creating successful and sustained positive changes is not an endeavour with a “high probability of success,” and “in fact, it is damn hard, no matter how positive or well-intentioned one may be, to create lasting changes in people’s lives, no matter how positive one is” (p. 218).

Along these lines, messages from evaluation indicating the need for changes (a.k.a. identifying “problems” and things that did not work) are not always particularly welcomed. But, as I have indicated and as the following articles discuss even more specifically, there are many ways in which evaluation can point out the need for change in a constructive fashion, in particular through using approaches to evaluation that can, at a minimum, acknowledge the inevitable positives in almost any situation. As Stame points out in her article in this issue, most approaches to evaluation that take a positive thinking approach are participative in nature, so that the manner in which evaluation is undertaken will help stakeholders appreciate intrinsically both the strengths of their programs and what else might be needed to increase their relevance and effectiveness. MacCoy’s and Sridharan and Warren’s articles demonstrate how this can work in practice.

Perhaps most important of all is to follow the tenets of a utilization-focused approach to evaluation. This requires bearing in mind, right from the planning and design stages of any evaluation, what strategies would most likely lead to appropriate use. Given the importance of the human dynamic, engagement of key stakeholders is an essential theme in approaches that support positive use of evaluation. This may be more straightforward with specific projects than with evaluation of programs that cover many different sites, or evaluation of policies or strategies where it is impossible to meet with all possible stakeholders. Nevertheless, there are many strategies that can be used, at a minimum, to engage with key stakeholders and to help build support for the evaluation.<sup>8</sup>

Considerations such as the above can and should form part of any approach to evaluation. Nevertheless, some evaluation approaches particularly lend themselves to facilitating positive thinking and action. This is the focus of this special theme segment of *CJPE*. In the next article in this journal, Stame provides an overview of a variety of such evaluation approaches. It is only possible in this special section to consider in depth a couple of potential approaches, which vary in how they view “positive.” MacCoy then discusses how Appreciative Inquiry can be used for evaluation. Sridharan and Warren discuss the potential of realist evaluation, presenting an example of how it has been applied in practice.

## NOTES

- 1 It is beyond the scope of this article for a full discussion of the meaning of “punishment.” Skinner (1970) defined it as removing a situation a person likes or setting up one that she/he does not like. Perhaps the most accepted definition of punishment in psychology (or at least with respect to operant conditioning) is based upon Azrin and Holz’s (1966) description of this as representing a reduction of the future probability of a specific response as a result of the immediate delivery of a stimulus for that response. A more common understanding of punishment, and how it is defined in the dictionary, is as a penalty or sanction imposed upon an offender.
- 2 See MacCoy in this issue for a more extensive list of related publications as well as implications for evaluation using an appreciative inquiry approach.
- 3 Joan, illiterate as she was and 600 years ahead of her time, embodied the four elements of the SOAR framework (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results) that are based upon an Appreciative Inquiry approach, as MacCoy refers to in his article in this issue.
- 4 To be sure, Joan was burned at the stake, in part due to treachery and in large part due to the impotence and unwillingness of the French king and, in particular, his primary advisor to budge from the status quo. Evaluators, irrespective of their approach, occasionally encounter similar obstacles and lack of willingness to consider any changes. But Joan of Arc gave France and the army a belief in their abilities to achieve victory, with the ejection of the occupiers occurring not long after her untimely death. Similarly, as Weiss (1998), for example, has documented, evaluation use is not always immediate, and sometimes needs to wait for a change in context or even of leadership, and may not occur until after the evaluator leaves the scene (hopefully not through a fiery death).
- 5 A discussion of appropriate and inappropriate use of targets and indicators is beyond the scope of this article, but see, for example, Bemelmans-Videc, Lonsdale, and Perrin (2007, in particular the chapters by Gray and Jenkins, Marra, Perrin, and van der Knaap); McDavid, Huse, and Hawthorn (2013); Perrin (1998, 2006b, 2012, in press); Tsoukas, 2004; and van der Knaap (2006).
- 6 Of course, as for example Benjamin and Greene (2009) and Skolits et al. (2009) indicate, evaluators can take on multiple roles, sometimes at various stages during the evaluation process. Nevertheless, as Benjamin and Greene discuss, referring to Ryan and Schwandt (2002), how evaluators view their main role affects how they go about conceptualizing and carrying out evaluation.
- 7 See Note 5 for examples of articles and reviews discussing this literature.
- 8 E.g., evaluation of the Paris Declaration, which won a “best evaluation” award from the American Evaluation Association in 2012 and is discussed in a special issue of this journal (*CJPE*, 2012).

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